



Displacement and Ethical Belonging in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract— This research paper examines the interrelated themes of displacement and moral belonging in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), a narrative set amid the potential collapse of apartheid South Africa. Gordimer flips the script on the current power structures by making the white Smales family move to the rural area where their black servant, July, lives. This exposes how fragile social privilege is. Displacement in the novel doesn't just mean moving around; it also means being confused about culture, psychology, and morals. The Smales' loss of authority demonstrates that in apartheid society, race, ownership, and economic power were prioritised over mutual recognition and moral accountability. The argument asserts that Gordimer depicts belonging as an ethical construct rather than a territorial or legal framework. July's ambiguous status, simultaneously potent and constrained, illustrates the moral complexities of survival, loyalty, and freedom in a society undergoing violent transformation. The novel disrupts existing identities, forcing readers to confront challenging questions of dependence, responsibility, and the possibility of cohabitation beyond hierarchical frameworks. This work utilises meticulous textual analysis to demonstrate how *July's People* challenges liberal humanism ideals and exposes the limitations of sympathy under persistent structural unfairness. The study argues that Gordimer does not offer a conciliatory view of belonging; rather, she portrays it as a contested and arduous process shaped by history, fear, and ethical considerations. The novel remains a profound exploration of how displacement can compel individuals to reassess their understanding of belonging in postcolonial contexts.



Keywords— Displacement, Ethical Belonging, Apartheid, Power Relations, Postcolonial Ethics.

Gordimer was born into a family of white minorities on November 20, 1923; her father was of Jewish descent, and her mother was of English descent. The politically sanctioned framework of racial segregation and the interplay among racial groups in South Africa would subsequently influence and motivate her. During her adolescence, Gordimer initiated her first confrontation with racism. She realised that Black youngsters were prohibited from entering the library she often visited. Notwithstanding her limited education, she devoted herself and her writings to advancing and enhancing her homeland. Since the publication of her initial works, "Oral History" and *July's People*, she has "devoted her career to composing collections that address the racial strife afflicting her

homeland" (Gordimer, "Oral History" 3). Gordimer is renowned for her books and short stories, including *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*, *My Son's Story*, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, and *Jump and Other Stories*, which address the difficulties of her country. These writings examine the dynamics among South Africa's ethnic groupings, occasionally employing humour, as shown in *The Conservationist*. Generally, Gordimer is the principal essayist born to a non-South African parent who ultimately "did not return to the metropolitan culture that engendered imperial literature" (Greenstein 27). She resides in South Africa, believing it to be integral to her identity, and is resolute in her pursuit of establishing herself as an African writer.

Gordimer's texts, although written in English, did not reflect English style but rather embodied South African style with all its characteristics. They contended that she is affiliated with white individuals, who are the originators and architects of racism and the apartheid state; hence, how could she authentically write about those she does not know well? Although she was white, she did not characterise Africa in the same manner as other whites. Her narrative "exhibits a distinctly specific Africa" (228), neither an empty realm prepared for white colonisation nor a lamentable aspect of the existing apartheid state. Gordimer's political perspective, articulated in her writings, especially in *The July's People*, was influenced by her affiliation with a specific twentieth-century white English-speaking demographic. The twentieth century was distinguished by the emergence of African patriotism and the accomplishments of Afrikaner nationalism. In South Africa, English-speaking citizens faced a challenging situation akin to discrimination rather than any other concept. Due to linguistic and cultural differences, they were excluded from both Afrikaner and African nationalism because of their physical characteristics.

In *July's People*, this disconcerting predicament is revealed through Maureen's ambivalence as the protagonist, torn between assimilating into black culture like her family members, especially her three children, and renouncing her previous beliefs, or escaping to reclaim her former esteemed lifestyle. Gordimer does not perceive herself as an English descendant; yet, "South African politics render her an 'outsider' to the experiences of the majority of her compatriots, and imperial literature continues to influence her fiction" (King 207). As an outsider in what she perceives as her home, she draws on British literary elements to articulate her perspective on events in her nation. This stance arises from the concept of the South African context, wherein "a book is valued by political powers rather than abstract powers" (Gordimer, *The Novel and the Nation in South Africa* 33). She contends that the author, of whom she is one, ought to engage with the significant aspects of human existence and refrain from confining themselves to their cultural and ethnic background within their own setting. Gordimer, a South African nationalist, contended the concept of "super-identity" in South Africa (34). This super-identity was established to avert crises and divisiveness among South Africans. Gordimer's sensitivity to the contemporary atmosphere and discourses of South Africa is evident in her writings.

One of her renowned and impactful novels is *The July's People*. It was released in 1981 as her original translation of the conclusion, before the collapse of the Apartheid regime. It was banned in Gordimer's native

country, South Africa, upon its publication. The narrative unfolds in an imagined chamber amidst a civil conflict between black and white populations in South Africa. Whites relinquish their rule over blacks and their supremacy. The designer positions the Smales amidst stark contrasts during an unconscious period when the whites were oblivious to the situation and the blacks were uncertain about their circumstances. The Smales is a Caucasian family residing in a predominantly dark neighbourhood in Johannesburg, accompanied by their former dark servant, who is a war refugee. The novel serves as a compelling example of Gordimer's oeuvre, exploring the dynamics of white behaviour towards black individuals and the corresponding reactions of the latter. It embodies the author's vision and her pursuit of "her own African perspective in a nation experiencing increasing black-and-white divisions" (King 208). The work also embodies the author's dissent with the government's decision to use Afrikaans as the medium of research in some African universities instead of English. This official initiative sought to limit the access of Black individuals to the broader world and compel them to acknowledge their subordinate status through the study of the native language of Apartheid.

This study employs a qualitative, textual-analytical methodology rooted in literary criticism to analyse this study. The source text is scrutinised through close reading, with emphasis on narrative structure, characterisation, spatial transitions, and symbolic depictions of power and identity. The research is underpinned by postcolonial theory, namely the notions of displacement, liminality, and ethical responsibility, utilising the analytical frameworks of scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Emmanuel Levinas. Secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, critical essays, and Gordimer's non-fiction, are utilised to situate the novel within the discourse of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The methodology employs comparative thematic analysis to examine the changing dynamics of belonging between the coloniser and the colonised. By combining textual evidence with ethical and postcolonial theory, the study seeks to develop a sophisticated understanding of how Gordimer examines moral belonging during periods of social and political turmoil.

The July's People, like some of Gordimer's earlier books, is about the relationship between the races. This is shown through the relationship between Maureen, the main character, and other characters, especially her servant, July. The book also shows a change in the balance of power. This change could help explain why whites were treating blacks badly earlier. The first chapter makes it obvious that blacks are always seen as white servants, not as their saviours. The

strange situation that Maureen, the hero, discovers on their first morning in the indigenous town, where they are staying with a relative, "July, their worker, their host" (Gordimer, *July's People* 23). Gordimer discusses a divided culture in *July's People*, which is depicted and mirrored in her fictional characters. In this job, racism isn't just about being physically separated; it's also about being emotionally racist. This is because physical and mental racism usually go together, and a person who is racist probably doesn't think about what they're doing. In other words, they don't care about the results of a person's actions while they are being performed. Readers see two parts of the book that show how whites and blacks are physically separate. The first is their separation before the war, as seen in their old house in Johannesburg. The second situation is when the Smales live in July's mother-in-law's house in July. This physical separation is also accompanied by emotional prejudice and isolation. Maureen's bad attitude in July shows that she is mentally racist. Maureen has been July's employer for fifteen years, and she still acts that way.

In her lecture, she acknowledges her action of saving them, as stated in the book "Frog Prince, Saviour, July" (11), although she maintains that it was his duty as a servant to do so. Gordimer viewed Maureen as "the last pioneer lady" (qtd. in Manivannan 743) because she was organised and cared for by men who were connected to her from father to husband, including the black servant in July, who looked after her and attempted to keep her out of danger and comfort. These actions exemplify a conventional colonial mindset, asserting that "a typical colonial attitude-that the white woman has a guy who takes care of her" (743). Maureen considers Bam's terrible behaviour and failure to save them from the situation to be a betrayal. July's refusal to find the weapon as the ultimate defender of white supremacy is a betrayal of their long-standing cooperation, which she thought was based on their mutual respect. During apartheid, educated, liberal white mistresses like Maureen were just as guilty of unconscious patriotism as their male counterparts. The shift she's made is so rapid that it harms Maureen's reputation and racial standing. She goes to "another moment, location, awareness" (Gordimer, *July's People* 29) since her prior life has changed. She feels like a different person almost as soon as she gets to the village, "She wasn't what she was" (29). No fiction could compete with what she learnt she didn't know, couldn't have imagined or discovered through imagination. This would explain how their lives and power changed from whites who thought they were better than the blacks who used to work for them.

Also, when she realises that she needs July more than him, her pride as a former employer is completely gone. She thought of the time before when she and his wife

used to give him money. But after getting closer to them, she realises that they don't need what she believed they were doing. Maureen feels she has to change how she acts around him because she sees a different version of herself: the one from July. Even though people try to change her mind and make her actions seem right, Maureen always has a reason for her actions and a reason to blame herself. But Maureen is attempting to figure out why July helped them get away from the city's end of the world. She could perceive that he's "not an easy man" (60).

She thought he was simple and not too complicated, which made her think he was like a civilised, upper-class (white) person. She couldn't even understand him because his servant spoke English poorly. Along with all of these things, she has done, Maureen and even her husband, Bam, are being unpleasant to him, especially when he won't do anything. For example, Maureen accuses July of taking small things from her in Johannesburg, even though July won't take care of the lost weapon. This claim stems from the belief that she is the master and that her servant wants to steal everything she has. Her husband, Bam, and Maureen, in addition to treating July like she's not as good as them, also treat her like she's not as good as them. He did this mostly because he lost his property and job. He loses his power and position when his chequebook and high-profile job as an architect are no longer useful in the local economy. Bam is less of a man because he lost his things. When the valuable weapon is found stolen:

He lay his back, on that bed ... furthermore, all of a sudden moved over his face, as the dad had never done his children ... She looked down on that individual who had nothing, presently. Prior to these children there was something much more terrible than seeing the wide posteriors of ladies, squatting. (25)

Bam is left with nothing but guilt because he doesn't know who he is without his money, job, car, and gun. He abruptly gives up his responsibilities and values. The Smales couple's actions and attitudes towards their dark-skinned servant, July, and his family in general were a way for the *July's People* to communicate about discrimination. To live separate from them or to act differently. Whether acting differently by living separately from them, and even not giving their culture and way of life any credit.

People in July think of their identity in two ways: as black or as white. The book is based on the two battles. The two main heroes are July and Maureen, who represent the two characters. Maureen tried to keep up with racial domination and prevalence, but July responded differently

than he had for the past fifteen years. He got more complicated and hostile because he thought she was better than him. The term 'July People' is the first hint of black identity in the book. It tells us to look for these blacks and learn more about them. The novel increasingly reveals the black identity. The novel first shows black identity in South Africa through the Maureen-July link, a master-servant relationship. People thought of blacks as servants, simple servants. Or what Gordimer said: "the fairly paid and placated male hireling, living in their yard since they were hitched, wearing two arrangements of regalia ... allowed his companions to visit him and his city spouse to lay down with him in his room" (11). This would make black people depend on white people, but the actuality is the opposite: as the Smales couples learn throughout the book, they depended on their servant more than they thought.

Maureen was also astonished by the tribal structure of the black people because she usually saw the social system as being based on the family rather than the tribe. People all around Africa know about this plan, but each tribe has its own rules and standards. On her first day in the village of July, Maureen woke up and saw that the tribal hut was lit up in some way. To live in harmony with nature instead of relying on the white stuff and way of life. They also move their "small funds around the bases of nature" when they build their buildings. They let the walls of mud sink back into the mud, then use that mud to build new walls (31). Africans employ this kind of architect to demolish the white architectural values that Bam, as a white architect, stands for. So, keeping the black identity made the white identity feel bad and made no sense. In addition to the people of July sticking to their own way of life and personalities, when they interacted with the blacks, the Smales adopted black culture less, save for Maureen, who felt compromised by it. Her daughter, Gina, learnt more about African culture and got along well with black ladies. She even eats "mealie-supper with her fingers" with other little girls from a shared pot (47). The dad was even involved in the village's life. Bam is talking to other guys and attempting to make him comprehend. Also, in July, Maureen got pushier. He slowly fights back against her, using words that don't convey fear at first:

Me? I must know who is stealing your things? Same like always. You make too much trouble for me. Here in my home too. Daniel, the chief, my-mother- my-wife with the house. Trouble, trouble from you. I don't want it anymore. You see? His hands flung out away from himself. You've got to get it back. No no. No no. Hysterically smiling repeating... She was stampeded by a wild rush of need to destroy everything between them. (26)

The moment captures a decisive ethical rupture shaped by spatial and social displacement. July's insistence on his domestic authority signals a shift from enforced service to self-assertion, making visible the strain of being held responsible for conflicts not of his making. His refusal to intervene reflects an ethical boundary being drawn, where former expectations of obedience are no longer sustainable. Maureen's agitated response, marked by emotional excess, reveals her inability to accept this reconfigured relationship. Her impulse to erase the distance between them paradoxically underscores its permanence. The scene thus exposes how displacement dismantles assumed moral entitlements and recasts belonging as an unstable, contested process shaped by power, responsibility, and refusal.

In *July's People*, displacement functions not merely as physical relocation but as a radical ethical disorientation that destabilises inherited identities, privileges, and moral certainties. The forced movement of the Smales family from their affluent urban home to July's rural village in the aftermath of political upheaval in South Africa exposes the fragility of white liberal humanism when stripped of institutional power. This displacement dismantles the illusion of ethical superiority that Maureen and Bamford Smales associate with their progressive ideals, revealing how deeply their sense of belonging is contingent upon racial and economic dominance. Gordimer constructs ethical belonging as a contested and shifting process rather than a stable moral position. The reversal of power relations in the village foregrounds July's ambiguous authority, positioned between servitude and agency. While July gains material and symbolic control, his ethical belonging remains unresolved, as his loyalties are fractured between traditional kinship obligations and the residual expectations imposed by the Smales. This liminal status complicates simplistic readings of empowerment, suggesting that displacement produces ethical ambiguity rather than moral resolution.

Maureen's psychological estrangement becomes particularly significant in this context. Her inability to ethically inhabit the new social order reflects the collapse of colonial frameworks that once guaranteed her identity and security. The loss of linguistic, spatial, and bodily autonomy forces her to confront the limits of empathy and cross-racial solidarity. Ethical belonging, for Maureen, is no longer grounded in intention but in accountability, a demand she ultimately fails to negotiate. Through these fractured relationships, Gordimer critiques the notion of universal belonging in a society structured by historical violence. Displacement in *July's People* thus emerges as an ethical test that exposes the uneven distribution of vulnerability and responsibility. Belonging, the novel suggests, cannot be

ethically claimed without confronting the asymmetries of power that persist even in moments of apparent reversal.

CONCLUSION

Gordimer's *July's People* leaves readers not with answers but with unease. The book doesn't see political change as a time of peace or moral clarity; instead, it shows how hard it can be for people to live without familiar structures of power and safety. Displacement makes people question what they thought they knew, putting them in situations where old habits, beliefs, and relationships don't work anymore. What happens is not renewal, but instead confusion, stress, and emotional strain. Gordimer shows how hard it is to trust someone who has a long history of being unequal to others. This is what happens when the relationship between July and the Smales changes. When things change, power doesn't just go away; it stays in people's attitudes, expectations, and silences. Fear and misunderstanding make attempts to live together weak and incomplete, thereby weakening the ethical connection. The book suggests that just being in the same place or going through the same hard times doesn't mean you belong to each other. Gordimer's story ends without a resolution, reflecting how hard it is for a society to redefine itself after injustice. *July's People* remind us that claiming a place in a group isn't easy or quick. It requires you to look at yourself in a way that makes you uncomfortable and be honest about your past. In this way, the book speaks strongly to postcolonial realities, showing that ethical belonging is still a hard, ongoing process rather than a completed goal.

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